

TRAUMA-RELATED SYMPTOMS

What is the skill?

Following stressful experiences, the brain gradually learns that danger has passed. Supportive caregivers help children process emotions, regain a sense of safety, and return to everyday activities.

What does normal development look like?

Most children recover from frightening experiences when they receive comfort, protection, and opportunities to talk or play through what happened. Their stress-response system gradually returns to baseline, allowing them to focus on learning, relationships, and exploration.

How does neglect interfere?

Neglect often involves ongoing rather than isolated stress. Without caregivers who consistently help regulate emotions, children's brains may continue responding as though danger is still present. Their nervous systems become organized around survival instead of exploration, making it difficult to relax, trust others, or accurately judge safety.

What might this look like?

Children may startle easily, have nightmares, avoid reminders of difficult experiences, become emotionally reactive, appear emotionally numb, or repeatedly reenact stressful experiences during play. Others may have difficulty concentrating because so much of their attention is devoted to monitoring their environment.

Parenting implications

Helping children heal requires creating environments that are predictable, safe, and emotionally responsive. Rather than asking, "Why are they acting this way?" caregivers can ask, "What is their nervous system trying to protect them from?" Professional trauma-informed treatment is often beneficial.

From Understanding to Attunement

Trauma-related behaviors are often survival strategies that once helped children cope with overwhelming experiences.